



EUROMIL Wednesday Q&A series

“How to prevent and destigmatise mental health issues in the Military?”



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What are the primary factors contributing to a higher prevalence of mental health issues among military personnel?

Military personnel are at a higher risk of experiencing mental health challenges due to several factors.

Soldiers often face traumatic and high-stress situations during deployments. The exposure to combat, witnessing violence, and experiencing loss can lead to conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues. Soldiers may be deployed multiple times, increasing their exposure to traumatic events and making it more likely for them to develop mental health problems. Also, frequent and extended separations from their families can strain relationships and lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness, further contributing to mental health issues. The unique challenges of military life, including relocating frequently, can make it difficult to maintain a stable support network.

Some military personnel have limited access to mental health services or face long waiting times, hindering timely intervention and treatment. The military culture has historically stigmatized mental health issues, often considering them a sign of weakness. As a result, many military personnel are reluctant to seek help for their mental health concerns.

Military personnel have ready access to firearms, which can increase the risk of impulsive actions during moments of crisis. This access can be particularly dangerous when coupled with mental health issues. This phenomenon is especially something we see in countries with police personnel with a military status such as e.g. Italy, Spain, Portugal and France.

Finally, returning to civilian life can be a difficult transition, with some veterans experiencing feelings of isolation and alienation. The shift from a highly structured military environment to civilian life can be overwhelming.



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“How to prevent and destigmatise mental health issues in the Military?”

Does the stigma still exist in the barracks or in workplaces? If so, what actions are key in tackling this phenomenon?

Stigma surrounding mental health issues still exists within the military, both in barracks and workplaces. To combat this phenomenon, several key actions are essential.

Military personnel and their superiors need comprehensive education and training on mental health awareness, recognizing signs of distress, and the importance of seeking help. This will help dispel myths and reduce stigma. Besides, leaders should encourage open conversations about mental health within the military community, emphasizing that seeking help is a sign of strength rather than weakness.

Despite considerable strides towards greater inclusion and diversity, certain stigmas persist in the military. In workplaces, racial and gender discrimination, along with age-related biases, continue to be challenges. Promoting diversity and inclusivity is crucial. It is vital to create an environment where all individuals, regardless of their background, feel valued and respected. This should be reflected in recruitment, promotion, and leadership positions.

However, it is also crucial to ensure that seeking mental health support is confidential, without the fear of repercussions. A robust support system should be in place, including access to counselling and resources. Mental health services should be integrated into the overall healthcare system within the military, normalizing their use and making them easily accessible. To be clear, mental health services must be destigmatized and individuals must be held accountable for their actions when it comes to perpetuating stigma or discrimination. Implementing clear policies and consequences for such behaviour is key.

The European Commission's mental health communication does not directly include military personnel. Is it not high time for military personnel, who are essentially citizens in uniform, to be part of the legislation? How could the European Parliament contribute to that?

The European Commission's mental health communication currently does not directly address the unique mental health challenges faced by military personnel. However, it is high time for military personnel, who are essentially citizens in uniform, to be included in European legislation. The European Parliament can and must play a crucial role in this process.

First, the European Parliament must advocate for the integration of military personnel into existing and future mental health legislation. This would require a comprehensive review of existing policies to ensure that they address the specific needs of military personnel. Collecting data on the mental health challenges faced by military personnel in Europe is essential to develop targeted policies. The European Parliament should support research initiatives in this regard by using resolutions to oblige the European Commission and via this way member states to deal with this issue and take their responsibilities.

Besides, the European Parliament can promote the development and funding of mental health programs specifically tailored to veterans, including support for reintegration, counselling, and access to specialized care. It can encourage member states to share best practices and collaborate on addressing mental health issues among military personnel. However once soldiers being deployed under the European Union flag, being in an EU mission or for example under the Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) framework, the European Parliament should advocate for EU covered mental and physical health care.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the prevalence of mental health issues among military personnel in Europe is a pressing concern that requires immediate attention. The persistence of stigma in barracks and workplaces hampers the well-being of soldiers. It is high time for the European Parliament and the European Commission to recognize the unique challenges faced by military personnel and incorporate them into mental health legislation. By implementing policies, reducing stigma, and promoting a culture of openness, Europe can better support its citizens in uniform, ultimately enhancing the overall mental health and well-being of military personnel.

Before closing, allow me to add that for the "Mental Health Wednesday Q&A Autumn 2023", the European Commission as well as members of the European Parliament have been asked to answer the above questions. For time, personnel and competence reasons representatives of both institutions decided not to participate at this edition. This makes me even more convinced that mental health specifically for military personnel must be addressed on the highest European Union level.